

Developing an eLearning Strategy at a Nigerian University

By

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Abstract

This paper explores the process of developing an institutional elearning strategy and why such a document is needed for successful implementation of elearning at a higher educational institution in a developing context. The University of Jos has been experimenting with elearning for almost two decades, and especially since 2006, quite a handful of individuals have integrated elearning into teaching. The upsurge in demand both from learners and practitioners has been aided by the activities of the Carnegie project and more recently by the Jos-Partnership for Higher Education in Africa Educational Technology Initiative. Even so, these have remained largely disparate, stand-alone practice. As a result, eLearning is yet to significantly change teaching at the University, or impact on the University in general. It has not yet snapped into place as an agent of change at the University of Jos. In order to mainstream elearning and map out long-term strategies, both for implementation and sustainability beyond the life time of funded projects, a University-wide stakeholder-grown eLearning Strategy document was seen as a critical starting point. This document was developed in February 2012. The process provided an opportunity to engage all stakeholders within the University and created a platform for all to interrogate and debate the need for elearning at the University and to decide for what purpose(s) it would be used. The experience has shown that without such a clear strategic document, it would be difficult for management to commit required resources for elearning, it will be impossible to benchmark practice, and implementation will have little or no impact on the institutional practice. This paper addresses the intricate process of developing an acceptable, people-oriented institutional elearning strategy, its value and the lessons learned.

Introduction

Technology-enabled learning is fast becoming pervasive in higher education around the world with available evidence indicating that the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the educational process is spreading faster than any other form of curricula change and innovation in the world (Gilbert, 1997). It is clear that advances in technology have led to a significant shift in the instructional processes (Nafukho and Park, 2004).). Many factors are responsible for the adoption of technology-mediated learning. Citing Morgan (2003), Teasley, (2010) notes that in most cases, those who have adopted the Learning Management System (LMS) have done so because they believed it would make teaching more efficient (Morgan, 2003). The pressure on Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to integrate new technologies, particularly online learning, into teaching and learning (Adewumi, Dooga, Dakas, Yakmut, and Mafwil 2011) is also informed by such factors as globalization. Nafukho (2007:22) notes that “we live in an integrated world characterized by globalization, change, uncertainty, and competition.” Nafukho’s comment also highlights another reason why some HEIs integrate ICT into their practice, gaining global visibility for faculty and institution. Some institutions believe that making course content and materials publicly available at a global level is a way to enhance their reputation and lower the cost for student access to educational materials (Omollo, 2011:6)

Technology is also thought to redress HEI challenges especially faced in developing countries, such as escalating student enrolments in the face of diminishing physical space as

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well as dwindling or obsolete equipment and limited human resource (Dooga, 2010). Of course, there are those who might adopt technology just for its glamour, or in response to the persuasive hype of vendors. However, the success of elearning in any institution must begin with a clear elearning policy and strategy (Nafukho 2007).

Why an Institutional eLearning Strategy?

HEIs have competing demands on increasingly scarce resources. ICT infrastructure requires major financial commitments and investment. Such investment is best done through a well articulated institutional policy and strategy. Among other things, such a strategy fosters an appropriate allocation of resources, determines staffing issues including the levels and amount of training that is required as well as faculty roles as well as addressing sustainability issues. Any unplanned initiative has very little chance of surviving in the long run. And if the expectation is to implement it throughout the institution, its chances for success are bleak indeed. An institutional eLearning Strategy provides a roadmap of action for the institution. It provides a sense of focus and direction and spells out clearly what needs to be done, who will do it, when it must be done and why it needs to be done. It is closely linked with and keys into the core strategic objectives of the institution.

A Short at an eLearning Strategy

The University of Jos recognised the need for such a document several years ago. In May 2008, the then Vice Chancellor set up a 13 man committee to draft an eLearning Strategy. The committee's task was facilitated and funded by the University of Jos Carnegie project. That committee worked tirelessly for four months, and on September 15, 2008, it submitted a draft strategy to university management. Although the intentions were noble and the committee's efforts commendable, the draft strategy never really took off. A number of reasons accounted for its poor impact on the University's eLearning drive.

1. It did not actively involve strategic stakeholders, such as faculties and departments and therefore was unknown to them. Although the draft was circulated to deans, faculties generally did not know what it was all about, how they were supposed to be involved and what their stake in the document was. This was a major setback for the document. The stated objectives included "Enabling academic staff to take the lead in developing and delivering eLearning," (Draft Unijos eLearning Strategy, 2008:2) the document did not specify how faculties would do this.
1. Because of the lack of clarity about the purpose and function of the draft strategy document, it was viewed as an imposition from the top down and was difficult to implement.
2. It failed to address key concerns of academic staff, such as recognition/reward for engaging in eLearning.
3. The document was dated in approach, so by 2012, it had essentially expired. In this regard, it did not adequately address the issue of sustainability.

All of these shortcomings only became evident when the pockets of elearning practitioners began to invoke the strategy as a guide for their practice. It was clear that a more inclusive elearning strategy document was needed.

Setting the Stage for a University-wide Stakeholder-grown eLearning Strategy

The Carnegie project, which had contributed tremendously in developing ICT infrastructure and human resource capacity in elearning at the University of Jos, and which had spearheaded the development of the 2008 eLearning Strategy document, was winding up in 2012. Similarly, the one-tranche PHEA ETI project was also ending in the same year. What would happen when these funded projects ended? How would eLearning practice be sustained and expanded in the University without donor funding to give it 'a

short in the arm'? Above all, what would define the practice of eLearning in the University and provide a focus for institutionalization? A new eLearning Strategy was needed to provide answers to some of these questions or to provide the direction.

Identifying Stakeholders

The project director of the University of Jos Carnegie project along with the head of the ICT Applications sub-committee felt that the 2008 document could be enhanced, strengthened and expanded to make it more effective. However, to avoid the pitfalls of the previous draft strategy, it was necessary to identify and involve stakeholders at all levels of framing the strategy. In addition to the identified pitfalls of the earlier draft strategy, a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) document points out four common pitfalls to be avoided in introducing ICTs into teaching. These include:

1. Installing learning technology without reviewing student needs and content availability;
2. Imposing technological systems from the top down without involving faculty and students;
3. Using inappropriate content from other regions of the world without customizing it appropriately, and
4. Producing low quality content that has poor instructional design and is not adapted to the technology in use (Balasubramanian, et al, 2009:24).

The Think Tank

After the Vice Chancellor approved that elearning strategy meetings should be held across the University, a planning team of three persons was set up in December 2011 to determine among other things the scope of and nature of consultations required, as well as other modalities. This was headed by the project director of the Jos-Carnegie project. The committee determined that it was necessary to employ the services of an external consultant to facilitate the stakeholder engagement process, someone experienced in drawing up eLearning Strategies for HEIs in Africa. In addition, the planning team recommended that the following groups be invited for the elearning strategy meetings:

1. University top management: the Vice Chancellor and principal officers;
2. Deans and directors of academic units
3. Heads of all academic departments, institutes and other academic units including the University Library
4. Leadership of students
5. The ICT Directorate.

Mobilization

In order to ensure that all the groups attend their sessions as arranged, the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic sent out the invitations. In it the DVC Academic explained that the invitation was at the instance of the Vice Chancellor. Everyone involved complied.

A simple programme was drawn and the same issues were presented to all the groups although there were slight variations between the meeting with University top management and the other groups. The meeting with University Management was designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To obtain an understanding of the management control framework for eLearning project implementation
2. To learn from select best practices and standards and inform the University's vision, mission and key strategic objectives as they relate to eLearning
3. To participate in collective strategic vision formulation for the eLearning project

For all the other groups, the objectives of the programme were:

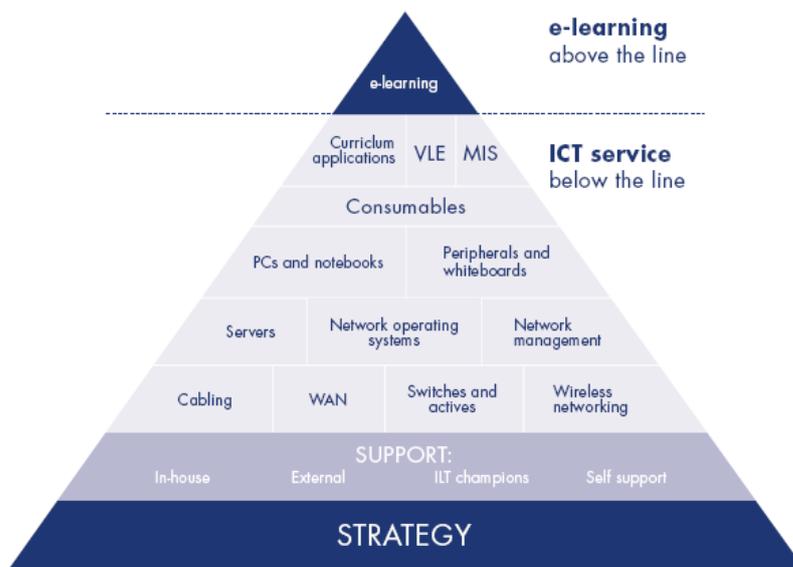
1. To breakdown the agreed upon vision into strategic action plan items that can be implemented by the department aligned to the overall vision
2. To carry out a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis on each department as part of current state assessment understanding the current preparedness to implement an elearning function
3. To carry out a gap analysis identifying requirements to meet the strategic objectives and future state as defined
4. To develop a departmental plan of action and budget to achieve targets within five (5) years

The series of discussions and the eventual strategy was framed around the interplay of three major dynamics, people, processes and technology, as illustrated below.



Regarding people, it addressed competencies and interests of all potential stakeholders in the University community. It also addressed the various processes that the people are responsible for and especially the management effort and support to ICT and elearning demonstrated in the establishment of appropriate organizational structures with sufficient budgetary allocations; and the third, the technology platform that should be aligned to the strategic business objectives of the University.

The technology part was framed to act as support to the elearning function, so that elearning would drive the needs and focus of ICT in the University and would determine the choice of technologies, budgeting and acquisitions. The strategy would thus provide the focus of the technology, which would in turn support elearning. This is illustrated below.



Stakeholder Consultations

The three dynamics were merely themes provided to provide a basis for discussion. Each session lasted about four hours with tea break and lunch. There was an activity session where participants, mainly the deans and heads of departments were provided with two forms for each dean and head of department to state what in their opinion were their strengths, weaknesses, needs and what they thought they would do with elearning in their faculties or departments. Those who wished to make further consultations were allowed to return the document on a later date within the week.

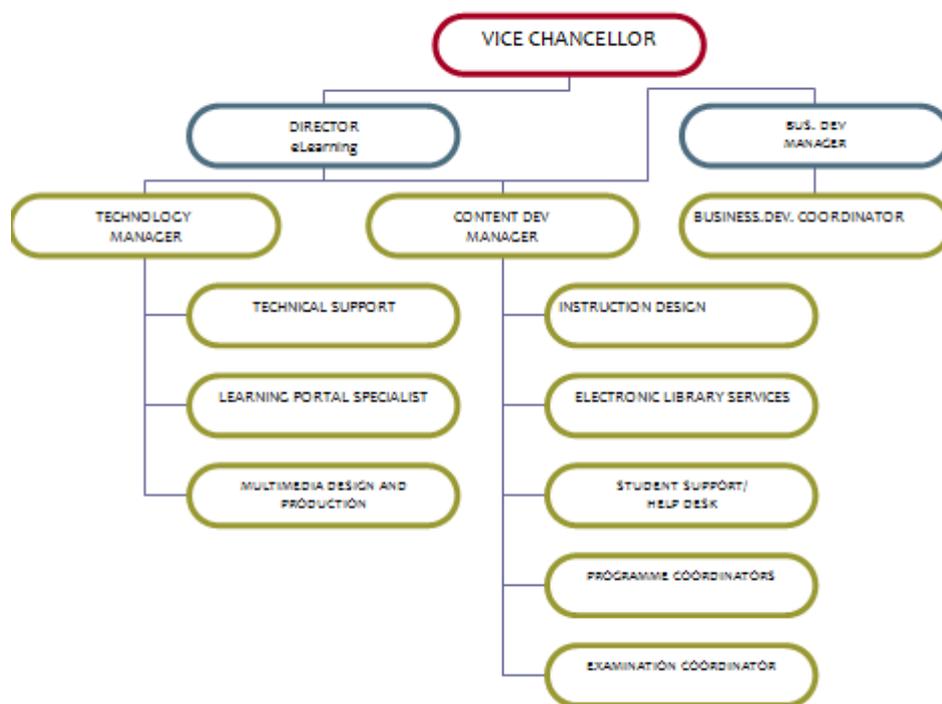
At the meeting with the Vice Chancellor and his management team, a sketch of stakeholders was produced as well as a blueprint of the entire eLearning Strategy. So, the meeting with deans first reviewed what had been discussed and agreed with Management. Deans expanded on it, refined it and drew from it action plans for their faculties. In the same way, the meetings with heads of departments reviewed what had been discussed with Management as well as Deans and the conclusions reached. Heads of departments were then free to make inputs, question aspects of what had been presented and eventually draw action plans and make commitments regarding what they would want to do as departments. Aside from stakeholders who were consulted to develop the strategy, an expanded stakeholder analysis was also made, outlining each stakeholder's considerations and expectations. This expanded list of stakeholders took into consideration all those who have a stake in the functioning of the University, including parents, professional bodies, the wider community as well as industry. The list was progressively refined as consultations were made with each group. Eventually, the following was captured in the strategy:

STAKEHOLDER	STAKEHOLDER'S OBJECTIVES & CONSIDERATIONS	STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS TO ACHIEVE STAKEHOLDERS OBJECTIVES AND CONSIDERATIONS
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquire knowledge skills and best practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing interactive multimedia content and

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be in a conducive (with sufficient resources and support) learning environment • Flexible Learning • Opportunity for Creativity and Innovation/revolution • Networking • Clear careers paths in line with employable programs 	<p>resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offline and Online courses & resources • Career advisory services integrated with portfolio tracking • Well versed instructors on online T&L methodologies • Information literacy orientation course • Effective feedback and evaluation mechanism on Teaching and Learning
Lecturers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducive (in terms of facilities, opportunity to network, opportunities for career development) environment for teaching and research • Motivation & Recognition (Intrinsic & Extrinsic) • Produce quality and employable graduates • Produce high quality research and effective teaching • Easier student assessment methods • Access to funding opportunities especially for research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information literacy orientation course • Adequate Access to computing resources and multimedia • Access to online resources and subscriptions • Training and support in content development • Automated student assessment methods • Online publishing of research results • Offline and Online courses & resources
Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly skilled and competent graduates • Quality research outputs • Partnership/collaboration opportunities • Access to student portfolios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searchable research database and student portfolios • Industry considerations incorporated in curriculum design
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On time graduation and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On time progress reports

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> good grades • Employability of student • Real time/online monitoring of student performance • High Quality of the curriculum and training impacted on the student • Low cost, high value training 	of student's performance (attendance, examination, portfolio)
Administration (Management & Non teaching staff including Librarians and technical staff)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition/visibility as a leading research, teaching and learning institution • Brand recognition • Revenue generation and funding • Optimised use of existing resources • Security & stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including eLearning in brand promotion • eLearning as an additional revenue stream • Optimised use of existing resources
Government (Ministry, NUC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliance • Increase in outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy objectives achieved • National and regional education objectives achieved • Compliance to all statutory and regulation guidelines
Professional Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry standards compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searchable research database and student portfolios

The strategy document recommended for a separate unit to be created under the oversight of the Vice Chancellor which would be responsible for the overall implementation of elearning at the University. The argument in favour of such a unit was that it would be focused, attract budgetary allocation and will be able to cater for the institution as a whole. The following structure was recommended for such a unit.



The strategic objectives of the document as well as the guiding principles, the key strategic plan highlights and the timescales of the 60 page eLearning Strategy are attached as an appendix.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

The draft document was eventually circulated to all deans, heads of academic departments and the ICT Directorate for further input before a final draft was produced. True, most participants were not professionals in developing a policy document, but they were expertly guided in the process by the consultant facilitator and members of the planning team. Participants debated freely on issues on which they held contrary views. In the end, a consensus was reached on all issues. This process of consulting key stakeholders to develop an eLearning Strategy has a major advantage. All participants feel that they, rather than somebody else, agreed and produced the document. As a result, stakeholders at all levels take ownership of the final document.

One key way in which the eLearning Strategy assured the sustainability of elearning beyond donor funding was that University Management committed itself to taking ownership of elearning. Management agreed to set up an elearning unit and make budgetary provisions for funding it. In addition, the clear definition of what the University desired to do with elearning would provide a pathway for future growth, as it keyed in directly with the University's overall vision and strategic mission. Above all, sustainability was enhanced by breaking down the barrier usually caused by the lack of a clearly defined system of reward for elearning. As the article "Challenges to E-Learning Support" points out, "while tenure and promotions represent longer-term incentives for faculty e-learning adoption, institutions have also needed to offer short-term 'carrots' to tip the perceived benefit balance" (2003:72). The University of Jos eLearning Strategy provides for both short-term "carrots" and longer term incentives.

The stakeholder consultation approach also exposed faculties and departments to areas of collaboration, and showed how different units can work together, with each bringing its skills and experiences to the table and thus save cost, enhance quality and generally make progress.

Most important, the meetings helped to clear misconceptions about elearning which many held, helped to educate participants and fostered a common sense of purpose by all. It was clear from the consultations that some faculties and departments felt elearning could not be achieved because of the wrong assumptions they held. One of these was the limited knowledge they had about how elearning works, and their feeling that the expense involved was beyond reach. To illustrate, many felt that the University or units thereof needed to provide a pc for every student in order to do elearning. It was a relief for many to learn that such an approach would be wasteful and unsustainable, but instead, the University through its ICT Directorate would saturate the campuses with wireless access points to support end user computing experience. All participants spent a long time debating the challenge of inadequate and unreliable power supply. The resolve to adopt cloud computing as a solution to the stability of access to the University's network helped to build confidence in many that elearning was achievable in their units.

Conclusions

The University of Jos context is in many ways typical of many African HEIs. The University is heavily under-resourced and has relied rather heavily on donor funding to grow its ICT infrastructure and build capacity. eLearning is a relatively new concept which is only recently being adopted by some in the institution. This too is typical of many institutions in Africa. The problem of resistance to institution-wide adoption of elearning, and the perception that it is somehow imposed on faculty and students is also familiar. Above all, the debate about reward for doing elearning, whether in cash or as forming part of promotion criteria, has formed part of nearly all elearning fora on the continent. From our experience in Jos, it is clear that obtaining an early buy-in from administration is crucial. Such a buy-in ensures that needed funds will be provided for elearning. Above all, it is clear that a stakeholder-grown, consultation-based approach to developing an eLearning Strategy is a political move. In the end, many stakeholders may have little competence in developing such a document. Nevertheless, the fact that they were involved makes the whole difference. For them, the document is what they produced, and is therefore what they have agreed to do, not what someone else arbitrarily produced and imposed on them.

Notes on Authors

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